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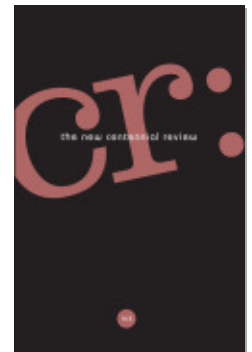
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# Sovereignty, Secrecy, and the Question of Magic in Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star*

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I would much rather have been a homicide detective than a writer. That's one thing I'm absolutely sure of.

—Roberto Bolaño (2011, 369)

THAT SOVEREIGNTY POSSESSES A MYSTICAL QUALITY, ONE THAT AT TIMES borders on the occult, is something on which many theorists have commented. We could think here of the way Schmitt positions the sovereign as simultaneously inside and outside of the political order, and of his claim that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (2006, 36); we could also mention the sustained engagement with magic in the work of the most important theorist working in Schmitt's wake, Giorgio Agamben.<sup>1</sup>

We could also think of the way Derrida, drawing upon Benjamin, refers to the “mystical foundation of authority”;<sup>2</sup> or of Hardt and Negri, who, in seeking to chart the “new global form of sovereignty” (2000, xii) that they call Empire, refer, in the preface to the book of this name, to Marx’s invitation, in *Capital*, to “descend into the hidden abode of production” (xvii)—the place at which, according to Marx, we will finally witness “the secret of profit making.” Indeed, haven’t many of the most important thinkers of modern political philosophy, from de la Boétie through Rousseau and beyond, sought to interrogate an element of politics that it would be no exaggeration to label a mystery: why the many acquiesce to the power of the few?

Few recent theorists, however, have gone so far as to use the term “magic” to refer to the workings of sovereignty. Deleuze and Guattari are an exception to this rule: in their 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus*, a work that is curiously overlooked in most contemporary debates around sovereignty, they write that “political sovereignty, or domination, has two heads: the magician-king and the jurist-priest” (1987, 351). What accounts, then, for the magical nature of one of the two poles of sovereignty? On the one hand, the “magic” of the king to whom Deleuze and Guattari, after Dumézil,<sup>3</sup> refer, lies in his ability to awe his subjects, to put across the idea that he possesses special powers that they do not, powers that serve to justify his authority. Yet we should not assume that the magical power in question separates the ethnological and “mythographical” sources on which Deleuze and Guattari base much of their investigation from our own experience of sovereignty: magic, after all, is in many ways a very prosaic term. We can think here of the definition one of its best-known Renaissance theorists, Giordano Bruno, gave it: “the word *magus*,” he writes, “designates the man who unites knowledge with the power to act” (2000, 12). If the sovereign is always in some way a magus, it is not because he practices sleight of hand, or makes us believe in what is not real, but because he possesses the power of poiesis: for him, saying is doing, and his words and thoughts are “magically” endowed with the power to act.<sup>4</sup>

This sovereign form of magic, however, is not the only one that Deleuze and Guattari deal with. Throughout their book, they argue that there is another form of magic, one that from time to time they label sorcery,<sup>5</sup> that lies outside of, and is irreducible to, the sovereign form, and that by its very nature

resists all attempts at containment by the latter. It is often difficult, however, to distinguish these two forms of magic: they may appear the same, share similar traits, even express themselves in decidedly similar ways. How, given how closely they relate to one another, might we tell them apart—how can we, all the while that we think about their complex interaction, understand that point at which the one ends and the other begins?

To respond to the questions I have just raised, this essay will examine what is, for Deleuze and Guattari, one of magic's specific modes of expression: that of secrecy; and it will do so by looking not primarily at these theorists but rather at a novel that, I contend, deals with the workings of secrecy in an exemplary manner: Roberto Bolaño's 1996 text *Distant Star*.<sup>6</sup> This novel tells the story of a killer who, by working in secret, remains a step ahead of everyone else; but it also tells the story of the hunt for this killer, a hunt that, to track down this master of secrets, must make use of another form of secrecy, one that he will be unable to detect. This would seem to take us far afield of both the concepts, magic and sovereignty, with which we began this essay; but as we will see, our reading of this story—a detective story of sorts—will lead us directly into a consideration of how secrecy is vital, on the one hand, for sovereignty to effect a certain poiesis; and how it leads inexorably, on the other hand, to sovereignty's outside.<sup>7</sup>

To begin this investigation, we turn to Bolaño's novel.



Many critics have noted that *Distant Star* is a deeply political novel,<sup>8</sup> and I want to begin by noting that the form of this politics, from the very beginning, is that of revolution. On the very first page, the narrator, looking back on his youth in the Chilean city of Concepción in the early 1970s (during the presidency of Salvador Allende, just before the coup), reflects on the poetry workshops he used to attend while at university: "Most of us talked a lot, not just about poetry, but politics, travel, . . . painting, architecture, photography, revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought" (3/13).<sup>9</sup> Just a few pages on, he echoes these comments, noting that he and his friends "were mostly members or sympathisers of the MIR or Trotskyite parties, although a few of us belonged to the Young Socialists or the Communist Party or one of the leftist Catholic parties" (6/16).

There is, however, one among the group of friends who does not seem to fit within this revolutionary framework. The first sentence of the novel introduces him: “I saw Carlos Wieder for the first time in 1971, or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile” (3/13); then, beginning a new paragraph, the narrator tells us the following:<sup>10</sup> “At that stage Wieder was calling himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle and occasionally attended Juan Stein’s poetry workshop in Concepción, the so-called capital of the south” (3/13). Wieder—or at this point, Ruiz-Tagle<sup>11</sup>—is not like the other workshop participants: he wears name-brand clothing, speaks proper Spanish (rather than the Marxist slang spoken by everyone else), and “isn’t even a leftist” (15/25, translation modified). But the strangest thing about him is his writing. The narrator describes the poetry workshops as exciting places, where people read their work passionately and engage in heated debates over the criticism they receive or mete out. Ruiz-Tagle is different. “He read his own work with a certain disengagement and distance, and accepted even the harshest comments without protest, as if the poems he had submitted for our criticism were not his own” (11/21). In an atmosphere of extreme political and artistic engagement, he comes across as cold and distant.

This is not to say, however, that he does not fit within the novel’s revolutionary framework. At one point in the first chapter, one of the workshop participants, a woman referred to as “Fat Marta” (*Marta “la Gorda” Posadas*) tells the narrator and his best friend, Bibiano O’Ryan, that Ruiz-Tagle “is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry” (14/24); when asked if she is referring to “the poetry he is planning to write,” she responds: “That he’s going to *perform* [*La que el va a hacer*]” (15/25). What, then, is this poetry that will be performed rather than written, done rather than spoken? To respond, we must introduce two more participants of Juan Stein’s poetry workshop, Veronica and Angelica Garmendia, “identical twins and the undisputed stars of the workshop” (5/15). The sisters are by far the best poets of the group, and they are also very close to Ruiz-Tagle; indeed, Veronica ends up falling in love with him. At a certain point in the first chapter, the military coup takes place, and the Garmendia sisters decide to leave Concepción, setting off with their aunt and their maid, an old Mapuche woman, to their country house. There, they are visited a few weeks later by Ruiz-Tagle. The twins and their aunt—though not

the maid, who is clearly terrified—entertain him by reading poetry, and when the festivities end, they show him to his room.

A few hours later, Ruiz-Tagle—“although from here on,” the narrator states, “I should call him Carlos Wieder” (21/31)—gets up; as the narrator announces, “the ‘New Chilean Poetry’ is about to be born” (20/30). Wieder goes into the aunt’s room and kills her; he hears the sound of a car pulling up; he walks into the maid’s room, but her bed is empty; getting over his momentary anger, he goes to open the door for the four men who have come in the car:

With these men the night comes into the Garmendias’ house. Fifteen minutes later, or ten perhaps, when they leave, the night leaves with them. The night comes in, and out it goes again, swift and efficient. And the bodies will never be found; but no, *one* body, just one, will appear years later in a mass grave, the body of Angelica Garmendia, my adorable, my incomparable Angelica, but only hers, as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god. (22–23/33)

This is the first act of Carlos Wieder, who has left behind the passive Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. His first inscription onto the world, or, as Fat Marta puts it, his first explosion. The first of his revolutionary poems.

A few words, then, about this poetry. First, not only does the text insist that Wieder’s act is a writing,<sup>12</sup> it also implies that it is much better than any of the other writing we hear about in the first chapter. This is strange, because the narrator tells us that both Juan Stein and the Garmendia sisters are much better poets than Wieder. Yet while the text never once cites, or looks in detail at, any of the “written” poetry it mentions, it spends several pages looking extremely closely at Wieder’s murders. Indeed, of all the poetry discussed in the first chapter, only Wieder’s merits the term “poetic act,”<sup>13</sup> a term that will be exceedingly important for the entire novel.<sup>14</sup> What, then, qualifies a poem as a poetic act? Clearly, the proximity of this term and the term “speech act” is not adventitious: a poem counts as a poetic act if it has a performative element, if it enacts real effects on the world, and thus calls into question the borders between “writing” and “reality”; it is only a poetic act, in other words, if it consists of a poiesis, and there is undoubtedly something magical about this: to return to Bruno’s definition, the poetic act, in *Distant Star*, unites

thinking and acting. From this standpoint, Wieder's first "poetic act" is in no way limited to the killing of the Garmendia family: the "act" clearly makes up the entire first chapter, in which he convinces everyone that he is something of a young innocent, trying to find himself, only to reveal himself, at the end, as working in the service of Pinochet's coup.

This brings us to another aspect of the poetic act, one that differentiates it, to a degree, from the speech act: its essential relationship with secrecy.<sup>15</sup> We can already see, having looked only at the novel's first chapter, that everything about Wieder is shrouded in secrecy, from his pseudonym, through the poems that may not be his own, to the killings that take place under the cover of night. How might we think of this form of secrecy? The first thing we can say is that it seems to be linked intimately to betrayal. Wieder has betrayed everyone around him (at one point, "Ruiz-Tagle" even takes photographs of the participants of the poetry workshops), especially the women, with whom he forges the closest relationships, and this calls to mind a claim that Deleuze and Guattari make about secrecy: secrets, they argue, always maintain an intimate relationship with betrayal; in my view, within their theoretical framework, neither is thinkable without the other.<sup>16</sup> A little later, we will have cause to question whether Wieder's secrets can truly be thought of as betrayals, but for the moment, let us note that there is another secrecy at work within the first chapter, one that is more difficult to understand than that of Wieder. Thus far, the narrator has given us some very intimate details about the events that take place in the Garmendias' country house on the night of the killing: the sisters' glee at seeing Wieder, the names of the books everyone leafs through after dinner, Wieder's momentary anger at not finding the maid in her room, and so forth. So let us pose a question, to which we will return in greater detail below: how does he know so much? In a way, the question is unfair: the narrator, who was obviously not present, has preceded his account with the words "It must have happened something like this" (19/29), and has not claimed that his account is anything more than conjecture; and after all, this is a novel, an act of literary creation—surely he has license to invent what he can only imagine. Yet as we will see, he often seems to know a bit more than he should about Wieder's poetic acts, as though the two of them shared some sort of secret.



With the killing of the Garmendias, the first chapter comes to an end, and the next chapter introduces the more purely “writerly” activity of Wieder: we learn that he is a skywriter, that is, he is a lieutenant in the Chilean Air Force whose favorite activity is to fly up into the skies above Chile and write messages in smoke. The narrator’s first exposure to this skywriting occurs when, soon after the coup, he is taken prisoner. He reasons that his brief imprisonment is not entirely unfortunate, as it permits him to witness what he calls “Carlos Wieder’s first poetic act” (24/34): while passing time in the yard of a transit center on the outskirts of Concepción, he looks up at the sky, where an airplane appears (it turns out to be a World War II–era German fighter plane), and transcribes, in the Latin of the Vulgate, the first four verses from the beginning of the book of Genesis, before finishing with a single word in Spanish: “LEARN [APRENDAN]” (29/39). How should we understand this poetic act that instantly makes Carlos Wieder a legend? In an essay that deals specifically with the theme of sovereignty in *Distant Star* and Bolaño’s previous novel, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, Gareth Williams argues that the word LEARN is “a command without content, if there ever was one. Learn what? Latin? The Book of Genesis? Creatio ex nihilo? The commanding language of the Roman imperial realm? That there are new rulers? To live in the sovereign ban? That history repeats itself?” (2009, 136). Williams reasons, accurately in my view, that none of these responses is adequate, and this leads him to the following conclusion:

Ultimately it is a contentless command, a divine/mortal command that does nothing more than guarantee the witness’s exclusion from the true content of the sovereign will. . . . LEARN! This is not “a signifying proposition but, so to speak, a commandment that commands nothing”. . . it is a command that commands its own commandment. It is sovereign command in force but without significance or specific content. (2009, 137)

Finding no suitable answer to the question (“Learn what?”) that he poses three times, Williams concludes that “LEARN” is an “empty” command, re-



lated to what Agamben (from whose *Homo Sacer* Williams takes the quotation in the passage I have just cited) describes as the law's "being in force without significance";<sup>17</sup> the command in question, in other words, is the simple fact of being captured within the sovereign exception, simultaneously included and excluded. But should we move so quickly to the conclusion that Wieder's words are "empty" or signify nothing? In fact, the words in question contain a very specific lesson, one that concerns the "magical" element of sovereignty: when Wieder writes "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," is the lesson not simply the correspondence of the two "objects" in question, earth and sky, a lesson perhaps best expressed by the Hermetic dictum "as above, so below"?<sup>18</sup> This dictum is indeed a command, for all those who inhabit the "below" in question: that of replicating, to the best of our ability, the perfection of the heavens above (all the while knowing that we will never be able to do so completely); the task we are given by this first verse is that of emulating what is "written in the stars." It is the sovereign lesson par excellence, and we can expand our understanding of it by reflecting upon the earlier version of *Distant Star*, the final part of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*,<sup>19</sup> where the pilot, in his first air show, transcribes, again in Latin, the beginning not of the first but rather the second book of Genesis: "IGITUR PERFECTI SUNT COELI ET TERRA ET OMNIS ORNATUS EORUM" (Bolaño 2009, 184); in the King James Version: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." Far from a command without content, this is a very precise, twofold lesson with regard to the nature of sovereignty: first, what is below must correspond to what is above; second (and already implied by the first lesson), nothing must escape this logic: in applying to both "above and below," it applies to everything, from the highest point of the heavens to the lowest cracks and crevices of the earth. The command concerns not only the hierarchical nature of sovereignty but also its all-encompassing nature; and what could convey this better than a writing in the sky, a writing visible to all—in letters that seem, in the narrator's words, "engendered by the sky itself" (25/35, translation modified)?

This very public writing is at the same time shrouded in secrecy: its message is anything but straightforward (indeed, I have just given a *Hermetic* interpretation of it);<sup>20</sup> it is written, save the last word, in Latin rather than

Spanish (the task falls to one of the narrator's fellow inmates, a man referred to as "el loco Norberto," to translate for the others); and no one but Wieder knows that the act will take place (he simply flies up into the sky, unannounced and without asking permission, in his little Messerschmitt). Yet its primary aim is not that of keeping but rather revealing a secret, that of the all-encompassing nature of sovereignty, its dream of infiltrating every possible space, of capturing everything imaginable within its grasp. This is reminiscent of one of Deleuze and Guattari's most famous claims about sovereignty, that it "only rules over what it is capable of interiorizing" (1987/1980, 360/445), a claim referred to by Agamben, among others.<sup>21</sup> But I would like to focus here on the way it echoes the work they do earlier in *A Thousand Plateaus* on the topic of linguistics. Language, they assert at the beginning of their "plateau" "Postulates of Linguistics," is not a tool of communication; it serves, rather, to give orders, and its primary unit is the "order-word." But what exactly does it order or command? Quite simply, it commands according to a logic of redundancy: a given utterance or order-word attains meaning only insofar as it presupposes all the other order-words within what they call a signifying regime; and anything that cannot be made to fit within this regime is not so much excluded (in the sense of having an autonomous existence outside of the regime) as deemed senseless, banished from the regime of sense itself, and hence delegitimized. Much like sovereignty, the gesture of the signifying regime is all-encompassing, in that it aims to determine the totality of the production of meaning; indeed, the work on politics that Deleuze and Guattari undertake late in the book presupposes the work on linguistics that comes earlier: sovereignty cannot exist without the signifying regime.

It is thus no surprise that Wieder, following this first air show, soon becomes something like the official poet of the regime, "in demand for more sky-writing displays," receiving "invitations to participate in ceremonies and commemorations" by "soldiers and gentlemen who know how to recognize a work of art when they see one, whether or not they understand it" (31/41): what this and his other poetic acts do is to lay bare (and hence reinforce) this secret of sovereignty, its dream to be all-encompassing, to determine not only politics but meaning itself (and hence to render any politics outside of its own "meaningless"). This is why we must, at this point, call into question Wieder's

credentials as a “revolutionary.” I am speaking here not only of the politics of his poetry but also of his understanding of secrecy: the latter, for him, is quite simply a play of concealment and revelation; the secret, in his poetic acts, lies beneath a mask or a façade (his pseudonym,<sup>22</sup> his writing in Latin, his knack for turning up unannounced), and at exactly the right moment, he “unmasks” it, peels back its disguise to reveal its truth. It is this limited understanding of secrecy that will lead to Wieder’s downfall—that will lead, more precisely, to his betrayal.



To begin to think about this betrayal, we move to Wieder’s greatest and final poetic act, in fact a pair of acts that take place on a single day and night in 1974. The day is given over to skywriting. A very select crowd is invited to watch Wieder perform from an airstrip, but because the show takes place in the skies above Santiago, the entire city will be able to witness it. Things get off to a rocky start: the weather is bad, and Wieder is advised by his superiors not to fly. Ignoring them, he takes off, disappears into an immense dark cloud, emerges over the outskirts of the capital, and writes: “*Death is friendship*” (80/89). Moving toward a pair of shantytowns, he writes “*Death is Chile*” (80/89); then, above the presidential palace: “*Death is responsibility*” (80/89). The entire air show continues in this vein; over the course of a couple of pages, we read: “*Death is love,*” “*Death is growth,*” “*Death is communion,*” “*Death is my heart,*” “*Take my heart,*” “*Carlos Wieder,*” and the final inscription, “*Death is resurrection*” (81–82/90–91). Wieder then lands, and after being admonished by his superiors (he has ignored several orders to abort the air show due to the stormy weather), he moves on to the second part of the exhibit, which consists, quite simply, of photographs of dead or dying women. Wieder invites a small group of Chile’s elite to the apartment of a friend, in whose spare room he has affixed photographs to the wall and ceiling. At the stroke of midnight, he begins to let them in one by one, but the reactions of the first visitors—one of them vomits; another, the owner of the flat, becomes irate; a third, an air force captain and Wieder’s former teacher, simply remains inside—are such that, at some point, everyone presses in, only to be confronted by seemingly innumerable photos of women who “look like mannequins, broken, dismem-

bered mannequins in some pictures,” lying on “a floor of porous, grey cement” (88–89/97–98). What the guests are faced with are images of the women Wieder has tortured or killed, in other words one of the most gruesome spectacles imaginable—the narrator even tells us that “up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken” (88/97).

It is clear that these acts are in no way separate but rather two sides of a single, unified exhibit. The narrator gives us plenty of indications of the unity of this two-sided act, for instance, by describing both sides in the same terms: while the skywriting consists of “aerial poetry” (78/87, translation modified), the photographs (which he labels the “epilogue” [78/87] to the skywriting) are a sort of “visual poetry” (78/87), a kind of writing insofar as they make up “a progression, an argument, a story (chronological, spiritual. . .), a plan” (88/97, translation modified). The exhibit thus expresses its “charmingly paradoxical” (78/87) unity by writing in two exactly opposite scripts; it expresses, in other words, a perfect, all-encompassing, inverse correspondence: where the skywriting takes place in an open space, the space of the photographs is hermetically sealed, and a whole host of oppositions—night/day, inside/outside, public/private, text/image, and so forth—structure the relationship between the exhibit’s two “halves.” Again, as per the logic of sovereignty within which Wieder is constantly working, there is no space, whether in the earth or the sky, that will escape this logic: as above, so below.

Yet this is not a simple repetition of his first air show: if this final exhibit is, as I suggested above, Wieder’s greatest poetic act, it is because there is another “lesson” he is giving here, another secret that he reveals. For it is not only in their form that the two sides of the exhibit are related but in their content: both sides are obsessed by death, and unsurprisingly deal with it in very similar ways. The aerial poetry, straightforward though it may be, enacts a very subtle lesson about death: the poem suggests that death can stand in for or equate to for virtually any possible noun, up to and including proper nouns (as when Wieder writes “Carlos Wieder”); any imaginable substantive can be said to both arise out of and lead back to death, a death that therefore serves as its truth; we cannot speak without speaking death, regardless of the words we utter, and we find a very similar logic at work in the “visual poetry,” in which every woman depicted has either arrived at or is on her way to death, a death

thereby posited as her inescapable truth. It is thus not only that the two sides of the exhibit correspond but that the nature of this correspondence is death, a death-as-truth that is at once transcendent (written in the sky above) and immanent (seeming to arise out of the very bodies of the women).

The lesson of this final exhibit, then, is not only the all-encompassing nature of sovereignty but its deathly truth, and this is again borne out by Deleuze and Guattari's comments on the signifying regime, which already constitutes a death of sorts—for what does it do, if not seek to marginalize as “senseless” anything that would lie to its outside, thus cutting off the possibility of all innovation in language, all meaning that cannot be immediately subsumed within its “redundancy”—cutting off the possibility, in short, of all life? If Deleuze and Guattari, speaking of the order-word, refer to “the death sentence it envelops” (1987/1980, 110/139), this is because the signifying regime seeks to render language inert, completely foreseeable. And this is why we are dealing here with Carlos Wieder's final poetic act. For as with the first aerial exhibit, Wieder casts himself here as the great revealer of secrets, peeling back the mask to reveal an essential truth about sovereignty: its intimate link with death.<sup>23</sup> What Wieder dreams of is nothing less than a sovereignty that would no longer seek to conceal its deathly nature: to put it in the terms of recent debates around sovereignty, what he seeks to bring about is a constituent power that would never “congeal” into a constituted power, that would remain suspended in the revolutionary moment in which “anything is possible,” endlessly repeating the violence of its origins. In this aim, Wieder yet again displays a rigorous and exact understanding of the logic of sovereignty; and yet at the same time, he becomes his own dupe, for what he does not understand is that, for sovereign power to function, the violence of its origins must remain hidden or take on a certain form of secrecy: that which “everybody knows,” but no one wants to admit. Once a sovereign order avows this violence, it puts itself into jeopardy, and this is what Wieder does not understand—unless he understands it all too well and is simply courageous enough to open himself to its risks. It is thus no surprise when Wieder, immediately following the photography exhibit, is arrested and eventually discharged from the air force (after which he spends the rest of the novel leading a clandestine existence, first in Chile, and then in Europe): it is precisely in his desire to peel

back the violent truth of sovereignty that he becomes too radical even for the Pinochet regime.

While his politics are decidedly radical, his practice of secrecy is not: he seeks to reveal something that should remain concealed, without ever calling into question the model of secrecy-as-concealment. But in the very words that recount all of this to us, there is another form of secrecy beginning to take shape, one less easy to recognize and less easy to control. It is to this form of secrecy that we now turn.



To do so, we'll have to go back over some of the territory we have just covered, namely, Wieder's final poetic act. I mentioned earlier that the air show takes place on a stormy day, and the weather has an effect on the writing: after Wieder's first three inscriptions, in which he writes that death is friendship, Chile, and responsibility, the narrator states that very few of the people watching from below "could decipher his words: the wind effaced them almost straight away" (80/89). Things soon become even more difficult: Wieder writes that death is love, growth, and communion, but "none of the generals or the generals' wives and children or the senior officers or the military, civil, ecclesiastical and cultural authorities present could read his words" (80/89), so violent has the storm become. As lightning begins to strike Santiago, he writes "*Death is cleansing*" (80/89), but the writing at this point is for all intents and purposes illegible: "All that was left in the sky were dark shreds, cuneiform characters, hieroglyphics, a child's scribble" (80/89). Still, there are a few spectators who "manage to understand" (80/89), but understanding, as he writes the final line of the poem, soon goes from difficult to impossible:

And then he had no smoke left to write with (for some time the smoke emitting from the fuselage had seemed more like fire than writing, a fire that melted into the rain), but he still wrote: *Death is resurrection*, and the faithful who had stayed by the airstrip did not understand anything, but they understood that Wieder was writing *something*. (82/91–92, translation modified)

No one knows exactly what Wieder writes except for him, and even this is not certain because, as we have just learned, it is possible that he only thinks he is

writing what he is writing. But in fact there is one other person who knows: the narrator. How is he so consistently able to make out Wieder's writing, which ranges from illegible to nonexistent. . . especially as he may not even have been present, because he told us in the previous chapter that he had "left Chile for good" (57/66)? The timing is difficult to ascertain, because he simply informs us that he left shortly after the coup. But between his probable absence (the air show, after all, took place in Santiago, not Concepción), and that Wieder's final words are written without being written, it is very difficult to understand how the narrator, and only the narrator, knows what Wieder has written, or shares this knowledge with only one other person: Wieder himself.

The narration of the photography exhibit is no less enigmatic. Recall that, while the air show takes place in the skies above Chile, the "visual poetry" is displayed for a handful of guests, and the narrator, it goes without saying, is not among them. To relate the evening's events, he relies on "a self-denunciatory memoir entitled *Neck in a Noose*" (84/93), published by an air force lieutenant, Julio César Muñoz Cano, years after the fact (no doubt after the fall of the Pinochet regime). The narrator nonetheless ends up giving us an intimate, extremely detailed account of the exhibit, starting from the moment everyone presses into the room:

There they found the captain, sitting on the bed. He was smoking and reading some typed notes that he had torn off the wall. . . . Wieder's father was contemplating some of the hundreds of photos with which the walls and part of the ceiling had been decorated. . . . Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. As the background hardly varied from one photo to another, he deduces that they have all been taken in the same place. The women look like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano does not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. In general (according to Muñoz Cano) the photos are of poor quality, although they make an extremely vivid impression on all who see them. The order in which they are exhibited is not haphazard: there is a progression, an argument, a story (chronological, spiritual . . . ), a plan. The images stuck to the

ceiling depict (according to Muñoz Cano) a kind of hell, but empty. Those pinned up (with thumbtacks) in the four corners seem to be an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos the dominant mood is elegiac (but how, Muñoz Cano asks himself, can *nostalgia* and *melancholy* exist in these photos?). The symbols are few but telling. A photo showing the cover of a book by François-Xavier de Maistre (the younger brother of Joseph de Maistre): *St. Petersburg Dialogues*. A photo of a photo of a young blonde woman who seems to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement. (88–89/97–98, translation modified)

The description is doubtless horrifying,<sup>24</sup> yet it also has an uncanny quality, in that there is something about it that doesn't seem quite right: it is so precise (the parenthetical mention of thumbtacks, the "photo of a photo," the reference to the Garmendia sisters—and is it not strange, in passing, that Muñoz Cano would know who they were?), so literary (the "elegiac" mood, the discernment of a story), it draws us in so well (note the switch, early in the passage, from past to present tense,<sup>25</sup> as though the only way to speak about this exhibit were to speak about it in the *now*), that we cannot help but wonder who, exactly, is in the room: surely this description was written not by one of Pinochet's lieutenants but by a poet? The narrator, though he has insisted upon the accuracy of the description (but on what basis does he make this claim?),<sup>26</sup> could not have been present. But how is Muñoz Cano, at what we suspect is a removal of 20 or so years, able to recount the details of the exhibit with such precision and such force? Let us also note the sheer number of times that Muñoz Cano is named in the passage. "Muñoz Cano claims"; "Muñoz Cano does not rule out the possibility"; "according to Muñoz Cano"; "Muñoz Cano asks himself." The lieutenant is mentioned by name no fewer than 25 times over the course of the few pages in which the exhibit is narrated, making the whole section seem like nothing less than an exercise in overcompensation: the narrator must assure us again and again (indeed, it seems that he is trying to assure himself) that these are someone else's words.

Once more, the narrator seems to know just a little bit too much about Carlos Wieder's poetic acts, and that this comes up over and over lends the entire narrative an air of unreliability. We could go so far as to say that this



unreliability forms the very tone of the novel, which makes it all the more remarkable that, to my knowledge, none of the already voluminous critical work on *Distant Star* deals with it in any systematic fashion. Writers such as Celina Manzoni (when she posits an uncertainty as to who, exactly, is narrating the novel<sup>27</sup>) and Luis Bagué Quílez (when he notes that “Bolaño seems reluctant to accept the authenticity” [2015, 178] of Wieder’s air show) come closest. But how is it that so many critics have undertaken close readings of Wieder’s poetic acts without calling into question the voice that narrates them? In the absence of such questioning, any examination of these acts becomes, it seems to me, a metaexamination. One of the difficulties here is that, to address the narrator’s unreliability, we cannot simply turn to the concept of the unreliable narrator, which most often presupposes a narrator who knows a truth that he is keeping from us—presupposes, in other words, a form of secrecy akin to the one we have associated with Carlos Wieder, whereby the secret is an “object” or piece of information that is at some point revealed. Clearly this is not the case with the narrator, who presents us with an enigmatic secrecy that does not have a “solution,” does not exist to hide anything, but seems, rather, to be the very language of the narration.

Far from bringing Wieder and the narrator together, then, secrecy seems more and more to push them apart,<sup>28</sup> and this again fits very nicely within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that secrecy is essentially incompatible with the sovereign signifying regime: “Lying and deception [*Le mensonge, la tricherie*],” they write, “are a fundamental part of the signifying regime, but secrecy is not” (1987/1980, 115/145, translation modified). For these thinkers, secrecy, far from a simple movement between concealment and revelation,<sup>29</sup> makes up a language of sorts: it is always closely related to what they call a “minor language,” which is never simply the language of a minority but rather a way of signifying that employs the tools of a major language or signifying regime, to undertake a work of deterritorialization on the latter—the attainment of a foreignness within the very language in which it works.<sup>30</sup> It is quite simply a secret language: it does not, in the manner of the one who lies or cheats, hide to later reveal itself (thereby paradoxically strengthening the signifying regime) but rather works at the very surface of the major language, all the while remaining ungraspable, foreign to its logic—in a word, distant.

And this distance is at the same time a betrayal, for the minor or secret language, by employing the resources of the major language to make it signify in a “foreign” manner, causes this major language to betray its own signifying regime at each turn. But if this is true, then in what way does the narrator create such a language—is his enigmatic secrecy engaged in some form of betrayal? To respond, we will look at what we will provisionally call his sole poetic act.



It is now the mid-1990s, and in the more than 20 years since Wieder’s two-sided art show, he has disappeared. A few Chileans, whether because they admire him, despise him, or want to bring him to justice, try to locate him but always come up empty handed; Bibiano O’Ryan, while researching a book on Nazi literature in the Americas (he has become an expert on the literature of the extreme right), occasionally catches glimpses of him—glimpses of work that, he surmises, must have been written by Wieder, published under pseudonyms in far-right journals from across Latin America. But of Wieder the man there is no trace.

Like Wieder, the narrator has been absent for most of the book, since informing us that he left Chile. We now learn that he has been living for years in Barcelona, eking out a meager existence as a writer (though he admits that for some time now, he has not been writing at all). One day a man named Abel Romero—a famous Chilean detective during Allende’s time, exiled by Pinochet and now living in Paris—shows up on his doorstep. Romero has been hired by a rich Chilean (whose identity is never revealed) to track down Wieder, and one of his first moves is to write O’Ryan. The latter sends Romero to see the narrator, because, as the detective explains to him, O’Ryan “seems to know Mr. Wieder very well, but he thinks you know him better” (117/126, translation modified). Romero brings the narrator a pile of right-wing magazines from all across Europe and offers him a large sum of money to read through the magazines for traces of Wieder. After several days of reading (during which, despite his initial hesitation, he truly melts into the magazines),<sup>31</sup> he locates an essay and a poem by a certain Jules Defoe in a pair of French magazines. Something tells him Defoe is actually Wieder, and he reports

this to Romero, who locates him in a little seaside town near Barcelona;<sup>32</sup> after the narrator definitively identifies him as Wieder, Romero kills him.

How, then, does the narrator succeed where others have failed? After all, Wieder has been able to escape detection for years, by people we would assume to be far more likely to find him—whether because of means, acumen, or motivation—than the narrator, this failed poet and failed revolutionary. But the question here is not only how the narrator has located him but also how he is able to escape detection: why, in other words, does Wieder remain unaware that he is being hunted? After all, all the detective work in the world is of no use if the prey is able to flee before being captured, and this is what has happened in all the previous attempts to ensnare Wieder: he always slips away just as he is about to be caught. How is the narrator—admittedly with the help of an accomplished detective—able to capture this master of concealment and able to keep himself hidden from this greatest reader of signs?

To respond, we will turn to the moment when the narrator identifies “Defoe” as Wieder. Romero and the narrator make the short trip from Barcelona to Wieder’s little seaside town; Romero then takes the narrator to a café frequented by “Defoe” and tells him to wait. He tries to relax and read a book—the complete works of Bruno Schulz—but “the words went by like incomprehensible beetles, occupying themselves in an enigmatic world” (143/151, translation modified); he thinks of friends from his youth, “so distant now” (143/151). We read a few of the narrator’s observations about the view from the window, and then we come to two telling paragraphs:

There was hardly a cloud in the sky. An ideal sky, I thought.

Then Carlos Wieder came in and sat down by the front window, three tables away. For a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin, looking over his shoulder at the book he had opened (a scientific book, a book about global warming, a book about the origin of the universe), so close he couldn’t fail to notice, but, as Romero had predicted, Wieder didn’t recognize me. (144/152, translation modified).

Wieder’s failure of recognition is perhaps unsurprising, given that the pair haven’t seen each other for over 20 years; Romero, for his part, assured the

narrator that Wieder would suspect nothing. Still, is it not curious that, the entire time they are together in the café (this takes up the better part of two pages of the novel, and what we assume to be an hour or two), Wieder has no suspicions about the narrator, who is probably pale as a ghost, casting more than occasional glances his way; who “felt as if my heart was going to burst out of my chest” (143/151); who may even interact once or twice with the waitress, in a Spanish distinctly similar to his own? How, sitting right out in the open, does the narrator keep himself secret?

To respond, let us turn back to a curious element of the paragraphs we have just looked at. I am not referring to the fact that the narrator describes seeing Wieder as though it were the most natural thing in the world (“Then Carlos Wieder came in and sat down”); if anything, this adequately conveys the experience of shock. Rather, I am speaking of the repetition in this passage, which first occurs in the first, brief paragraph, with the word “sky”: “There was hardly a cloud in the sky. An ideal sky, I thought.” This seems straightforward enough, but the repetition becomes more pronounced in the next paragraph, when the narrator imagines himself joined to Wieder, “looking over his shoulder at the book he had opened (a scientific book, a book about global warming, a book about the origin of the universe).” Why does he write the word “book” four times? Perhaps each instance of the word lends precision to the narrative: there is a book; then there is a book about science; then a book about a particular branch of science (environmental or climatic). Until the fourth occurrence: what does the origin of the universe have to do with global warming? All sorts of hypotheses are possible: perhaps the book suggests that global warming is inevitable, already contained by the universe at its origins; maybe it is an allegory of evil, of the evil that so interests the novel. The least we can say is that these are interpretive stretches; it would be far more accurate to say that the repetition isn’t noteworthy at all, that it is entirely unremarkable: far from searching for precision, the narrator speaks in this way because this is the way he speaks, because sometimes people speak in this manner.

But this is precisely the point, for it is via this unremarkable repetition that the narrator constructs his minor or secret language. The more closely we look at the novel, the more we notice the narrator going back on things he has

said, claims he has made, but not to correct or revise what came before: repeated instances of words or phrases do not cancel out the first instances but simply add themselves to them, in what appears to be a language of accumulation (but as we will see below, is in fact anything but). The book begins, for instance, with the following sentence: “The first time I saw Carlos Wieder was in 1971 or perhaps in 1972, when Salvador Allende was President of Chile” (3/13, translation modified). The narrator here is uncertain of the year he first saw Wieder, and this is not so much a deep as a shallow uncertainty, an uncertainty so mundane, so seemingly unimportant (who really cares which of these two years it was, after all?), that it is easy to overlook. Yet this mundane uncertainty comes to constitute the very tone of the book. We follow it into the next paragraph, where the narrator says of Ruiz-Tagle: “I saw him once a week, twice, when I went to the workshop” (3/13, translation modified). The narrator again does not so much correct himself as insert a second possibility without cancelling out the first—again, about something utterly unimportant. On the next page, again referring to Ruiz-Tagle, he says: “I don’t mean to say that he was elegant—although, in his own way, he was”; and then, just a few lines down: “In a word, Ruiz-Tagle was elegant” (4/14, translation modified).<sup>33</sup> The examples abound: at one point in the eighth chapter, Romero asks the narrator to watch three pornographic films in which he suspects Wieder to have served as assistant cameraman. Halfway through the first film, the narrator “confessed that I couldn’t take three porno films in a row” (123/132), but then, as soon as Romero leaves, he admits: “That night I watched the two remaining films, then I went back and watched the first one again. And then I watched the other two a second time” (124/133). On the one hand, this would not be the first time someone was suddenly drawn in by a work that had at first repulsed him. On the other hand, if the first of these two statements is indeed a confession—“I couldn’t take three porno films in a row”—the second, most definitely, is not: when the narrator tells us that he watched the remaining films, in succession, that very night, he is not going back on what he said before, he is simply relating the facts, in a way that, for him, is the most natural act in the world. I mentioned another example of this earlier in the essay: the moment at which the narrator refers to Wieder’s first skywriting exhibit as his “first poetic act” (24/34) even though, in the first

chapter, he referred to the killing of the Garmendia twins with this very term.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, this repetition, of precisely the most trivial matters, comes to form the very language of the narrative. But to what end? There are at least two ways of responding to this question. First, recall that *Distant Star* recounts the story of Carlos Wieder, in what appears to be an entirely straightforward manner. And this is why Wieder's failure to recognize the narrator is key: what he does not recognize, quite simply, are the very words that tell his story. By constantly repeating himself, by going back again and again on what is most mundane, the narrator builds a language of stuttering, one that at once recounts the exploits of, and keeps itself secret from, Wieder, thus rendering him incapable of recognizing the very words that ensnare him—words that are at once most profoundly his, yet utterly foreign to him. This creation of a language within a language, then, is the narrator's sole poetic act, in that it allows him to do what no one else has been able to do: capture Carlos Wieder.

Yet if this were the narrator's sole achievement, we would have to agree with those critics, such as Gareth Williams and Juliet Lynd, who argue that the novel's ending is "deeply unsatisfying."<sup>35</sup> If it is in fact anything but, this is because, in capturing Wieder, the narrator at the same time undertakes something of far greater magnitude. Who, after all, is Wieder? He is the man who undertakes all of his poetic acts in the service of sovereignty; he is the man whose adherence to the deathly truth of sovereignty is such that he is too much to bear even for the sovereign. If the narrator is able to capture him, in other words, it is because he takes the language that underlies all of Wieder's acts—the signifying regime of sovereignty—and stops it in its tracks: in coming so close to Wieder that he is at times indissociable from him, he inhabits the pilot's language, but only so as to cause it to stutter, to repeat itself at its most mundane moments (those moments, in other words, that it most takes for granted), constantly forcing it to turn back upon itself. In a word, he deterritorializes it, and in doing so, he undoes its major achievement, its major production. For if the workings of sovereignty are such that it literally makes the truth—deciding what is included within, and excluded from, its regime of sense—the narrator, by employing sovereignty's signifying regime only to keep claims sus-

pended alongside one another (rather than choosing between them), suspends the power of this regime to create certainty, to create the truth.

And this, finally, is why we cannot really call the narrator's creation of a secret language within the signifying regime a poetic act. For while he seems to proceed by accretion (adding competing claims to those he has made, adding sentences that do not fit within the narrative), his constant additions in fact take something away: sovereignty's capacity to interiorize sense within its signifying regime. Far from an actor, it would be more accurate to view the narrator as a passive being, for if he creates a secret language, it is a language of subtraction, a language that arises not outside of and in addition to the signifying regime but in the latter's impoverishment of itself: in its own self-betrayal. It is thus that the narrator effects a kind of magic, not that of the sovereign magician-king but the one that Deleuze and Guattari call that of the sorcerer; a magic that, in the impoverishment it undertakes on the regime of death, allows us to discern the stammerings, the stutterings, of a birth: a life arising in the interstices of the logic of sovereignty.<sup>36</sup>



#### NOTES

1. See, for instance, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, where Agamben makes reference to magic, all the while leaving it at the borders of his investigation. Writing about Marcel Mauss's observations on the ways prayers affect God in different religions, he states: "It is not always easy, from this perspective, to distinguish between magic and religion" (2011, 225), but he quickly resolves this issue by noting that "Mauss distinguishes magical rites from religious ones because, while the former appear to be endowed with an immanent power, the latter produce their effects only through the intervention of divine powers, which exist outside the rite itself" (Agamben 2011, 225). A little later, he criticizes the dependence of sociologists and anthropologists on the concept (more of a pseudoconcept, in this case) of magic, which allows them, in his view, to "explain that which we do not understand about the society in which we live as ultimately a magical survival"; countering this, he writes: "We do not believe in the magical power of acclamations and of liturgy, and we are convinced that not even theologians or emperors really believed in it" (Agamben 2011, 230).

For an investigation into Agamben's relationship with astrology, specifically "the potentiality inherent in the astrological signature" (Colilli 2015, xviii), see Paul Colilli's recent book *Agamben and the Signature of Astrology*.

2. I refer, of course, to his “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” (Derrida 1990).
3. Tellingly, Deleuze and Guattari, in elaborating their theory of sovereignty, spend far more time reading major figures from the fields of ethnology and “mythography” (such as Dumézil, Detienne, Clastres, etc.), who have tended to take magic seriously, than theorists from politics or philosophy, who have tended to marginalize it.
4. On this issue, see especially one of the figures whom Deleuze and Guattari cite at length, Marcel Detienne: in *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, for instance, Detienne examines how the figure of the sovereign in archaic Greece, but also in “the great Near Eastern civilizations” (1996, 60), is inseparable, in his workings, from those of the poet and the diviner: the power of all three depend on their ability to literally make the truth with their words, rather than referring, in language, to an already-constituted truth: “In this period, the function of sovereignty was inseparable from the organization of the world, and every aspect of the royal person was a dimension of his cosmic power” (Detienne 1996, 61); “When the king presided in the name of the gods over a judgment by ordeal, he ‘told the truth,’ or rather conveyed the ‘truth.’ Like the poet and the diviner, the king was also a master of truth. . . . poets and diviners shared the same gift of prophecy and diviners and kings possessed the same power and used the same techniques” (Detienne 1996, 67).
5. See those sections of the plateau “Becoming Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming Imperceptible. . .” entitled “Memories of a Sorcerer” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239–52).
6. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Bolaño is deeply interested in the question of magic. The references here are numerous, but perhaps the most obvious example is the early novel *Monsieur Pain* (2010b), the eponymous protagonist of which is a mesmerist who attempts to treat the dying César Vallejo but whose controversial techniques lead to his exclusion from the Paris clinic in which Vallejo is a patient.
7. A word about my reading strategy with regard to the secret: while many theorists have written at length on secrecy, including Derrida (2008; see also Derrida and Ferraris 2001), Johnson (2012), and Marin (1984), my aim here is not to engage with the theory of secrecy per se but rather to think specifically about the light that can be shed on Bolaño’s novel by Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking of secrecy. For a more general investigation into the place of secrecy in Deleuze and Guattari, see Colebrook (2010).
8. The most overtly “political” treatments of the novel include those essays by Lepage (2007), Bagué Quílez (2015), Di Stefano (2013), O’Byrne (2015), and Williams (2009). I will refer to all of these essays, especially the latter, over the course of this essay.
9. While I am using Chris Andrews’s English translation of the novel, I will often modify this translation, sometimes substantially. For this reason, I will always include the page references from both the English translation and the original (in that order, and separated by a forward slash).
10. At the risk of awkwardness, I will refer to him as “the narrator” throughout the essay, for he is never named in the novel. (This is very different from the novel’s “precursor”—the shorter version of this story, which makes up the last entry of Bolaño’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas*—in which he is very clearly referred to as “Bolaño” [e.g., 2009, 204].) In the short



preface to *Distant Star*, a first-person narrator whom we assume to be Bolaño (as he refers to “my novel *Nazi Literature in the Americas*” [1/11]) claims that he “composed the present novel” (1/11) with a compatriot, Arturo B., a name Bolaño often used as a kind of alter ego. This claim, along with the fact that the novel at times seems to go out of its way not to name the narrator, makes any definitive identification impossible, in my view. See Juliet Lynd’s excellent discussion of the matter (2011, 180 n.14).

11. On this pseudonym, see Williams (2009, 135).
12. Celina Manzoni makes this point in the same terms, referring to “el asesinato de las mellizas Garmendia” as Wieder’s “primer acto de poesía revolucionaria” (2002, 44).
13. The novel employs the term *acto poético*, or variations thereof (e.g., *acción poética*), throughout. So important is this term that the entire structure of the novel, I argue, is based on it: each of the novel’s ten chapters, in my view, corresponds to a particular poetic act or set of poetic acts. As many critics have noted, the term makes explicit reference to the CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte), an avant-garde movement that emerged in the 1970s in Chile. For interesting discussions of CADA and Bolaño’s specific references to it, see Jennerjahn (2002, especially 8–10) and di Stefano (2013). Jennerjahn, in her deservedly much-cited article, shows how many of Wieder’s profascist poetic acts have their roots in overtly anti-Pinochet Chilean art from the 1970s and 1980s.

The logic of the term “poetic act” provides the reasons for which, while I am generally sympathetic to Eugenio di Stefano’s warnings about the dangers of collapsing the distinction between politics and aesthetics (an objective that he ascribes, somewhat reductively in my view, to affect theory and more generally to “postmodernism”), I must disagree with his claim that *Distant Star* seeks to carve out “a space for the aesthetic proper” (di Stefano 2013, 465), a sphere of what he calls “aesthetic autonomy.” In fact, precisely the opposite is true of Wieder and of the “poetic act” (as Bolaño understands it) in general: Wieder, along with figures such as Juan Stein, Diego Soto, and the narrator himself, only truly begin to “write”—to enter the poetic realm—when they begin to act, most often when they commit acts of violence.

14. The admiration for Wieder by his seeming enemies, especially the narrator, is a theme that the text comes back to again and again. We could think here of two instances commented upon by Caroline Lepage: the first, when the narrator, after Wieder’s first air show, discerns on him “des laurier suprêmes” by calling him “un poeta” (Lepage 2007, 84); the second, Bibiano’s history of “fascist literary movements in the southern cone” (108/117, translation modified) in which the narrator’s friend, “quite at ease with Argentine or Brazilian torturers” (109/117), finds himself “disturbed and disoriented” (109/117) when dealing with Wieder, and quotes Borges’s words about Beckford’s *Vathek*: “I would go so far as to affirm that it is the first truly atrocious Hell in literature” (109/117). We could also point here to the narrator’s experience of reading the works of “Jules Defoe,” one of Wieder’s pseudonyms: the narrator qualifies an essay by Defoe as “jerky and ferocious” and compares it to “a hurricane contemplated in the immense distance of the Earth” (135/143, translation modified); while a poem by Defoe, to the narrator’s shame, reminds him of “John Cage’s poetic

- diary spliced with lines that sounded like Julián del Casal or Magallanes Moure translated into French by a Japanese psychotic" (135/143).
15. On the theme of secrecy in Bolaño (though not in *Distant Star*), see the special section "Literature: Secret: World" in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 3 (Winter 2014), especially the essays by Brett Levinson (2014) and Patrick Dove (2014).
  16. On the relationship between secrecy and betrayal in Deleuze and Guattari, see, for instance, the "Treatise on Nomadology," where they refer to the warrior or nomad as the "man of secrecy" (1987, 353), and a little later say that he is "in the position of betraying everything" (354).
  17. Williams quotes these words on p. 137.
  18. "As above, so below" derives from the second verse of the Tabula Smaragdina, which begins "That which is above is like that which is below." The translation is Seligmann's, from his *History of Magic*; I take it from Yates, who cites it in her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1991, 150 n. 2). Early in this book, Yates discusses the proximity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the book of Genesis (1991, 3).
  19. The last "entry" of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* tells essentially the same story as *Distant Star*, in a highly condensed form.
  20. Celina Manzoni implicitly thinks along these lines when she refers to this act as the rewriting of a "código misterioso" (2002, 44).
  21. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben cites these words early in the section entitled "The Logic of Sovereignty," before forging what he thinks of as an "even more complex [*ancora piú complessa*]" (1998, 18) formulation of "inclusive exclusion." It is my contention, however, that Agamben's theory of sovereignty misses precisely the complexity of the way Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the relationship between interior and exterior. I will deal with this at length in an upcoming study of sovereignty in Agamben.
  22. Thus, while I find Rory O'Bryen's claims that *Distant Star* "is brimming with heteronyms" (2015, 29), and that Wieder's various aliases function as heteronyms, deeply compelling, I must, in the end, disagree. There may indeed, as O'Bryen claims, be nothing to suggest that Wieder is the "true" name for Ruiz-Tagle, or that the other names he employs, such as R. P. English and Jules Defoe, are somehow less authentic than Carlos Wieder. The point is that all of his "disguises" lead back to a single source and obey a very traditional logic of truth and falsehood; where Wieder is concerned, we are far more in the realm of the *pseudo-* than the *hetero-*.
  23. Of course, many of those who have written on the theme of sovereignty have dealt with precisely this theme; in addition to Deleuze and Guattari, we could think here again of Agamben, for whom the entire logic of sovereignty comes down to the sovereign's ability to kill without sacrificing.
  24. Horrifying as the exhibit is, I must disagree with Lili McDowell Carlsen's claim that it is a "sociopathic project disguised as art" in which "Bolaño takes absurdity to a nightmarish extreme" (2014, 146) or, more broadly, that Wieder's acts display a "lack of coherency or reason" (2014, 148). On the contrary, this exhibit, as with all of Wieder's poetic acts, is nothing if not rigorous and systematic.

25. Chris Andrews completely misses this shift, simply placing the entire passage in the past tense. I would say that this passage, which functions as something like the navel of the text, is the place at which Andrews's very free translation most clearly runs up against its limits, for why has he "corrected" Bolaño here? His doing so takes away from what we might think of as the text's rigorous inexactitude, which I will discuss further below.
26. He writes that, while his description of Wieder's final air show may be faulty—"In 1974, hallucinations were not uncommon" (83/92)—the "account of the photographic exhibit in the flat is. . . accurate" (83/92).
27. The remarkable passage in question in Manzoni's essay, in which she very precisely sketches out the stakes of the narrator's horrible proximity to Wieder, runs thus: "la complejidad de lo que se quiere narrar, la dificultad para encontrarle un sentido a lo narrado se intensifican, aunque puede parecer una paradoja, porque de algún modo, socialmente, por una parte, *es como si ya todo hubiera sido narrado* y por otra, porque es como si los lenguajes de la narración se hubieran agotado" (2002, 41, emphasis mine).
28. Thus, while I generally agree with those writers, such as Celina Manzoni and Franklin Rodríguez, who speak of Wieder and the narrator as doubles of one another, I think this doubling relationship begins to fray the moment we consider it from the standpoint of the secret: secrecy is the place at which a clear distinction begins to appear between them. I should note, however, that both of these writers make exceedingly important points about the text by way of their use of the Freudian uncanny. Rodríguez, for instance, notes that the uncanny double in *Distant Star* is the figure by way of which "self-criticism gradually surfaces as central" (2010, 205)—by way of which the narrator, to use the terms of the novel, is able to LEARN.

Reading Bolaño is often an uncanny experience, and it is thus unsurprising that the use of this term in Bolaño criticism is not limited to readings of *Distant Star*. See, for instance, Piero Salabè's "Langsam vergessen wir es," which deals with the novel *The Third Reich*, and concludes that Bolaño "erinnert uns daran, dass wir noch immer in einer unheimlichen Zeit leben" (2010, 89).

29. Indeed, if we think about it, can a secret that disappears the moment it is "revealed" truly be considered a secret, in any essential way? Is secrecy, in this framework, ever anything more than a temporary state?
30. Deleuze and Guattari are fond of quoting Proust's dictum that "'masterpieces are written in a kind of foreign language'" (quoted in Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 98).
31. The narrator's uncanny overlapping with Wieder in almost every aspect of the narrative, along with the narrator's insistence on the high quality and even revolutionary nature of Wieder's poetry, undermines Gareth Williams's claim that *Distant Star*, along with its "predecessor," *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, is marked by an "inability to contemplate the political from a place other than the friend/enemy divide" (2009, 129). If anything, the problem is the opposite: what causes the narrator's despair is the knowledge of his uncanny proximity to Wieder (the knowledge that they have been traveling "in the *same boat*" [122/131, emphasis in original]); he would like nothing more than to declare Wieder a simple enemy, clearly distinct from him, but he knows that this is impossible.

32. The town is later identified as Blanes, where Bolaño spent the last years of his life. Blanes is also referred to in the novel's brief preface (1/11).
33. Andrews omits this repetition in his translation, where *No pretendo decir que fuera elegante* is rendered "I don't mean he was a dandy," and *En una palabra, Ruiz-Tagle era elegante* becomes "In other words, Ruiz-Tagle was well dressed."
34. This repetition is not the only curious aspect of the narration: we might also mention the way that phrases come out of nowhere and lead nowhere, standing in seeming isolation, as when the narrator says of a pair of teachers imprisoned with him in the Concepción transit center: "They didn't like me" (30/40); or, when he enters a video store with Romero, to find an image of an actress they have been discussing: "I think I had only been inside a video store once before" (128/137, translation modified). Such claims correspond to nothing that follows or precedes them, and they remain undeveloped: they both fit seamlessly into the story, in other words, and come from elsewhere.
35. See Lynd (2011, 177). Williams, looking at the end of the novel, claims that we find in the narrator "an ever-present sense of melancholic paralysis" (2009, 138), and this may be true, on the condition that we think of it in a way different from Williams: the paralysis in question, anything but melancholic, is a property not of the narrator but of the narrative, specifically its ability to stutter, turn back on itself, hold itself in suspense.
36. This "life" is not without relation to Deleuze's comments in his final published text, "Immanence: A Life," about that immanence that is not "enclosed in the transcendent," that "is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things" (in this case, the sovereign signifying regime) but is "no longer immanence to anything other than itself": only of such a "pure immanence" can we say that "it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life" (2005, 27).

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